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August a year ago, before rains fell in the shortgrass country, word spread that from the Montana line to the West Coast down to the Rio Grande that farmers hadn't cut enough hay to stuff a medium-sized rag doll.

The news wasn't as bad as it sounds now. Before the August floods in '96, the country languished so void of hope that the rates on do-it-yourself moving vans were more in order than trucking hay. Looked more likely there was going to be a run on applications for temporary teaching certificates than even a superficial question on the price of hay. High-priced hay, or no hay at all, meant little to people facing a long winter stocked in prairie dogs and big horned hoot owls.

Years ago I thought of planting the old field at the ranch in hay to store for hard times. Way back, we used to make a crop of Sudan and Johnsongrass every 13 or 14 years. On perfect seasons, we might come out as much as \$300 ahead farming the full 200 acres, not counting the labor or the depreciation on the machinery.

One reason the venture failed is that amateur farmers don't know the proper percentage of inert ingredients to add to a bale of hay. I have a friend farming on the South Concho River on the southeast of side of San Angelo who knows exactly how many extra swipes to make to keep from overdoing hoarhound and broomweed additives to a 60-pound bale of redtop cane. At six dollars a bale, he makes 10

cents a pound on the sunflowers and gourd vines invading his turnrows. All he has to do to make piles of dough is wait on some broke down herder out west to come balling into Angelo determined to go broke feeding hay to a bunch of old drouth cattle. Takes an artist to keep from adding so many gourd vines or ragweed that the bales smell too strong to sell.

I checked out inventory from last year. We have two cuttings left, or about enough to hay our cattle during a short snowstorm. The bottom is a 1988 vintage coastal noted for absorbing the moisture off concrete barn floors. The second row is a spangletop ribbon grass, highly prized by archers for target backstops. The barn smells like a silo, but by the time it snows along after Christmas, the old cows will be so hungry, a little mildew won't matter.

In July, a trucker hauling alfalfa from Fort Stockton drove by to let everybody know around Mertzon, including the hay farmers down on Spring Creek, that he paid \$165 a ton in the field for his load of small bales. He claimed hay was bringing \$9 a bale in San Antonio at the racetracks. He said, "I don't know what ranchers are going to do when winter hits and no hay in the barn and ice and snow on those old cow's backs." ("I don't know what ranchers are going to do," is a dead giveaway; the person doesn't give a damn what ranchers are going to do when winter hits.)

The doomsday trucker failed to mention that alfalfa from across the Rio Grande at Presidio cost \$155 a ton put in the barn at the ranch. However, it's worth knowing that

one slight difficulty in freighting hay from the border is that narcotics agents may delay shipment a couple of days using dogs sniffing the bales and working the prisoners off-loading the truck to search for drugs. Be warned a lot of good hay is going to be scattered off on the ground, the way those trusties are going to be throwing bales around with the dogs baying and making everybody too nervous to concentrate. Also, the jailhouse odor and the heavy dog smell is going to cause livestock to waste part of the hay on the feed ground.

So instead of buying hay subject to a government investigation, I am going to liquidate my supply. I am going to load the 70 bales of spangle and coastal hay and head for San Antonio. I am going to sleep in the hay trailer and cook over a campfire far enough away from my stash to be safe but close enough to keep my eye on those crooked jockeys hanging around the grounds. I am going to go to the races all dressed up in white ice cream pants, a soft blue shirt and red tie and a seersucker coat. I am going to bet one bale's worth on every race. Stay until a longshot comes in and kick off what's left of the spangle grass, then skip town before the book on the next race reopens.

About 60 more days are left before the nights become cool in the shortgrass country. Maybe I had better just take along 35 bales of hay. We might need roughage earlier than I think ...